

Cavanagh, Forest Ranger

The Great Conservation Novel

By HAMLIN GARLAND

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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER X.

THE POACHERS.

ONE morning as he topped the rise between the sawmill and his own station Cavanagh heard two rifle shots in quick succession snapping across the high peak on his left. Bringing his horse to a stand, he unsung his fieldglasses and slowly and minutely swept the sawny slopes of Sheep mountain, from which the forbidden sounds seemed to come.

"A herder shooting coyotes," was his first thought. Then, remembering that there were no camps in that direction and that a flock of mountain sheep (which he had been guarding carefully) habitually fed round that grassy peak, his mind changed. "I wonder if those fellows are after those sheep," he mused as he angled down the slope. "I reckon it's up to me to see."

In less than three hours he was over on the trail in the canyon, quite certain that the hunters were still above him. He rode quietly up the valley, pausing often to listen and to scrutinize the landscape, but no sign of campfire and no further rifle shots came, and at last he went into camp upon the trail, resolved to wait till the poachers appeared, a ward which his experience as a soldier helped him to maintain without nodding.

In these long hours his thought played about the remembrance of his last visit to the Fork and his hour with Lee. He wondered what she was doing at the moment. How charming she had looked there at Redfields—so girlish in form, so serious and womanly of face!

He felt as never before the ineluctable loneliness of the ranger's life. The guardians of these high places must forever be solitary. No ranger could rightly be husband and father, for to bring women and children into these solitudes would be cruel.

He put all this aside—for the time—by remembering that he was a soldier under orders and that marriage was a long way off, and so smoked his pipe and waited for the dawn, persistent as a Sioux and as silent as a fox.

At daylight, there being still no sign of his quarry, he saddled his horse and was about to ride up the trail when he caught the sound of voices and the sharp click of iron hoofs on the rocks above him. With his horse's bridle in his arm he awaited the approaching horsemen, resolute and ready to act.

As the marauders rounded the elbow in the trail he was surprised to



HE AWAITED THE APPROACHING HORSEMEN, RESOLUTE AND READY TO ACT.

recognize in the leader young Gregg. The other man was a stranger, an older man, with a grizzled beard, and tall and stooping figure.

"Hello, Joe!" called the ranger. "You're astir early!"

The youth's fat face remained imperturbable, but his eyes betrayed uneasiness. "Yes, it's a long pull into town."

"Been hunting?" queried the ranger, still with cheery, polite interest.

"Oh, no; just visiting one of my sheep camps."

Cavanagh's voice was a little less sure. "Not on this creek," he declared. "I moved your herder last week." He walked forward. "That's a heavy load for a short trip to a sheep camp." He put his hand on the pack. "I guess you'll have to open up, for I heard two shots yesterday morning up where that flock of mountain sheep is running, and, furthermore, I can see blood stains on this middle blanket."

Gregg threw out a hand in command. "Open it up, Edwards!" he said sullenly.

Off came the outfit, and under the last lay the noble head of a wild ram, a look of reproach still in his splendid eyes.

Cavanagh's face hardened. "I thought so. Now leave it back and

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mean? Where's he?"

Like lightning, "The sheep's head!"

"Oh, don't be scared! No one is hurt yet."

The girl flinched with confusion as the men turned over her shoulder. "One of the girls told me Mr. Cavanagh had killed a man," she explained. "Where is he?"

Like a bolt of lightning, "They say he's taking supper at Mike Halsey's, though why he didn't come here I don't see. What's he going to do?" she asked. "Won't the marshal take the men if his hands?"

"Not without warrant from Higley, and Higley is out of town. Ross'll have to hold 'em till Higley gets back or else take 'em over to Chauvenet." Like a shot, "Old Higley! Yes, he's been known to disappear before when there was some real work to be done."

Lee went back to her own task with a vague sense of alarm. "Certainly they will not dare to interfere with an officer in the discharge of his duties," she thought. She was eager to see him, and the thought that he might be obliged to ride away to Chauvenet without a word to her gave her a deeper feeling of annoyance and unrest. That he was in any real danger she could not believe.

It was disconcerting to Cavanagh to see how some of the most influential citizens contrived to give encouragement to the riotous element of the town. A wink, a gesture, a careless word to the proper messenger, conveyed to the saloon-keepers an assurance of sympathy which inflamed their resentment to the murderous point. It was confessedly one of the worst communities in the state.

"Let's run Cavanagh!" was the suggestion of several of Gregg's friends.

The fact that the ranger was a competent member of the law and that the man's head had been found on the poacher's pack made very little difference to these irresponsible instigators to assault. It was wonderful how highly that leading young rancher Joe Gregg, was prized at the moment. "It's in evidence that the son of a lead herder should be held up in this way by one of the forestry Cassars," declared one of the merchants.

The discussion which took place over the bars of the town was at the riot heat by 9 o'clock, and soon after 10 a crowd of howling, whooping bad boys and disreputable ranch hands were parading the walks, breathing out vile threats against the ranger.

Accustomed to men of this type, Cavanagh watched them come and go at Halsey's bar with calculating eyes. "There will be no trouble for an hour or two, but meanwhile what is to be done? Higley is not to be found, and the town marshal is also out of town."

To Halsey he said: "I am acting, as you know, under both federal and state authority, and I call upon you as a law-abiding citizen to aid me in holding these men prisoners. I shall camp right here till morning or until the magistrate or the marshal relieves me of my captives."

Halsey was himself a sportsman—a genuine lover of hunting and a fairly consistent upholder of the game laws; but, perceiving that the whole town had apparently lined up in opposition to the ranger, he lost courage. His consent was half-hearted, and he edged away toward the front window of his barroom, nervously seeking to be neutral—"to carry water on both shoulders," as the phrase goes.

The talk grew less jocular as the drinks took effect, and Nell Ballard, separating herself from the crowd, came forward, calling loudly: "Come out of there, Joe! Come out and have a drink!"

His words conveyed less of battle than his tone. He was, in fact, urging a revolt, and Cavanagh knew it. Gregg rose as if to comply. The ranger stopped him.

"Keep your seat," said he, and to Ballard he warningly remarked, "And you keep away from my prisoners."

"Do you own this saloon?" retorted the fellow truculently. "I reckon Halsey's customers have some rights. What are you doing here, anyway? This is no jail."

"Halsey has given me the privilege of holding my prisoners here till the justice is found. It isn't my fault that the town is without judge or jail." He was weakened by the knowledge that Halsey had only half consented to aid justice, but his pride was roused, and he was determined upon carrying his arrest to its legitimate end. "I'm going to see that these men are punished if I have to carry them to Sulphur City," he added.

"Smash the lights!" shouted some one at the back.

Here was the first real note of war, and Ross cried out sharply, "If a man lifts a hand toward the light I'll cut it off!"

There was a stealthy movement in the crowd, and, leaping upon the counter, a reckless cub reached for the lamp.

Cavanagh's revolver shattered the globe in the fellow's very palm. "Get down from there!" he commanded.

(To be continued)

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